

**Statement of Congresswoman Kristi Noem  
Before the House Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee on Water Resources and the  
Environment  
November 30, 2011**

Thank you, Chairman Gibbs and Ranking Member Bishop for holding this very important hearing. I know I speak for many South Dakotans when I say we appreciate your interest in what happened along the Missouri River this summer and we thank you for your leadership.

The Missouri River system, which was affected by devastating flooding this year, spans thousands of miles and covers 7 states. In response to the flooding this year, I and 17 of my colleagues formed the House Missouri River Working Group to focus first and foremost on the need for greater flood control on the Missouri River System, but also to highlight the damage these floods have caused to our communities and businesses. Many of the working group members signed a letter to the Chairman requesting this important hearing.

In South Dakota we were also privileged and thankful to have Chairman Mica and Rep. Schuster come to see and hear about the situation firsthand with a tour and public roundtable in Pierre with the Corps of Engineers and other stakeholders, when the river was still well beyond its banks and damaging many homes and businesses. Mayor Laurie Gill of Pierre has prepared written testimony for today's hearing and I would ask that it be included in the record.

Thousands of residents in South Dakota were affected by the flooding and many were uprooted from their homes during the flood event, worse, some lost their homes and were unable to return after the waters finally subsided.

This disaster of epic proportions revealed the tremendous sense of community that exists in our states, towns and cities. I would like to recognize and commend those affected by the flood for their perseverance and fortitude in the face of this tremendous adversity and also those who volunteered hours and days of their lives helping sandbag, in some cases for people they had never met.

Additionally, I would also like to thank state and local officials, community leaders, and emergency managers for their tireless work on behalf of their citizens during this crisis and their pervasive focus on public safety to ensure loss of life and property was as minimal as possible. Many worked long hours, seven days a week, for months on end. Jeff Dooley, manager of the Dakota Dunes Community Improvement District, and Kim Blaeser, a homeowner and treasurer for Riv-r-Land estates are from communities impacted by the flood and have both prepared written statements for this hearing. I would ask that they be included as part of the record.

Finally, I would also like to extend special recognition and thanks to the South Dakota National Guard, who responded swiftly to help prepare for the looming disaster and were stationed for weeks in communities up and down the river as the flood dragged on.

This was not like most natural disasters. This flood event lasted over 90 days. It began in late May and lasted until September. The situation began in February as runoff levels into the system from snowpack in the mountains and northern plains began to far exceed normal amounts. Then in March and April, runoff amounts skyrocketed compared to normal levels. As flood storage within the system depleted throughout the spring, releases across the system were not increased to adequately compensate for risk of future runoff and subsequent rains. The Corps maintains that there was no need to evacuate water at historic levels before May.

Then came May. With flood storage depleted, torrential rains fell in Montana. On May 23, the Corps announced it was increasing releases to 70,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) from the Oahe Dam near Pierre, SD and 75,000 from Gavin's Point. This was 11,000 cfs over the previous record. Residents and communities along the river began to feverishly prepare by sandbagging and constructing berms, but it didn't end there. Five days later it was announced that the 5 lower dams would reach 150,000 cfs, nearly double what the Corps had announced just days earlier. Releases finally peaked at around 160,000 cfs for the 4 dams in South Dakota. The result was a slow moving disaster of epic proportions as homes and businesses along the river were overwhelmed with water and residents were forced to evacuate. Vast amounts of property was damaged or destroyed.

I believe, as others have stated, that this flood event was part natural disaster and part man-made disaster. Certainly we cannot discount that some amount of human error played a role in this flood event.

The Corps has repeatedly reiterated that it operated in accordance with the master manual and the rain in May was a significant contributing factor in the flooding. However, this reasoning does not account for the runoff that occurred from February to April. While it is likely that some amount of flooding could not be avoided given the runoff and rain flowing into the system, surely something could have been done differently that would have avoided releases that were double and nearly triple previous record releases. From the information I have seen, I believe the Corps of Engineers carries some responsibility for this disaster and their level of responsibility should be explored during this hearing.

Another area where I disagree with the Corps is on timely notification of residents about the risk of possible flooding. This is what I hear most frequently from my constituents. Many of those along the river can prepare for higher than normal releases if given reasonable advance notice and adequate information. They were afforded neither. Those below the mainstem dams saw water release levels escalate so quickly, that just when they thought they had built their sandbag walls to the proper elevation to keep the waters at bay, they were forced to go higher.

Nothing in modern history could be compared to this flood event in terms of the 60 million acre-feet of runoff but I think historical context is helpful to contrast the response of the Corps of Engineers in the face of flooding in the past. The only flood to come close to these levels occurred in 1997 at 50 million acre-feet. The winter of 1996-1997 also saw some of the

heaviest snowfalls in memory in the northern plains and Rocky Mountains. According to news articles and firsthand accounts from residents, beginning in late March of 1997 the Corps dramatically increased releases from Oahe dam to account for the plains and mountain snowpack. Shortly thereafter the Corps notified everyone below the dam in Pierre and Ft. Pierre that releases could increase to as much as 60,000 cfs during May and June. 60,000 cfs peak release seems paltry compared to the 160,300 cfs record set this year. The Corps then advised potentially affected residents to buy flood insurance two months ahead of time, to account for the 30 day waiting period for federal flood insurance, and also helped supply sandbag walls across some riverside lawns. That type of communication was not present during the 2011 flood event.

The Corps has acknowledged that it could have been more effective in notification and has said it is committed to improved communication about runoff levels and releases in the future. I hope they are committed to that statement as those along the river certainly deserve better than what they received this year.

As we try to rebuild and put this behind us there are still many lingering questions. The biggest one is “could this happen again?” The Corps of Engineers recently released their Annual Operating Plan (AOP) for the Missouri River System for 2012 that incorporated minimal changes for operation of the system into 2012. I, like many of my constituents, am concerned that the AOP contained few changes in the wake of this disastrous event. Similarly, it should also be noted that the system is not what it was after this year’s flood and infrastructure is in need of repair. I am thankful that the Corps recently decided after 8 public forums in communities along the Missouri that it would change its operating approach to be more “aggressive” in the future, but we have yet to find out exactly what “aggressive” means.

This is of particular concern because National Weather Service (NWS) forecasts indicate we may be continuing into a wet cycle with significant precipitation and snowpack for 2012. We should have learned something from this year’s experience to better plan for future wet cycles. The Corps needs flexible management of the river to account for these cyclical trends and still allow for proper balance between the authorized purposes of the system, with a priority on flood control. I hope that the Corps’ internal review and independent external review of the flood will further this goal.

Witnessing this disaster and reviewing the management plan going forward have left me with many questions. These are some of the questions I have for the Corps:

1. On November 4, the Corps indicated it would change its approach to the 2012 Annual Operating Plan (AOP) as a result of public forums it held this fall. What does it intend to change and how is it going to take a more “aggressive stance”?
2. What is the Corps doing to promote more dynamic, real-time decision making in the future including modifying their forecasting and hydrologic models and incorporating all available data?

3. The Corps has both internal and external review panels expected to be completed by the end of this year. What would be the process for modifying management practices based on the findings of these panels?
4. Does the Corps have the flexibility within the manual to more adequately deal with future wet cycles and the type of conditions we experienced this year?
5. The Corps has cost estimates for repairs to the system caused by the damage this year, but do they have estimates of the total economic cost of the flooding?

The flood event and future management questions regarding the Missouri River System I have just described are why this hearing is so critically important. I look forward to the testimony of the other witnesses and questions from the committee.

I would also like to take a moment to introduce a witness for today's hearing who comes from my home state of South Dakota. Brad Lawrence is the Director of Public Works for the City of Fort Pierre, one of the communities hit hard by the flooding this year. He has extensive knowledge and experience with the river system and was one of the first people to raise concerns about flooding back in early February. I am pleased he is here today and I would ask that his full written statement be included in the record.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to testify before the committee today and for holding this hearing.